Our feed mill changed the recipe for 20 percent cubes last fall. To address an escalation in corn and milo prices exceeding the scale of the numbers of the big stock market runs in 1929, the millers added dried corn distillers grain purchased from breweries or from ethanol plants.

First time we noticed the difference was in a load of feed for weaning the heifer calves in the horse trap. Coughing and nasal discharge from the cool autumn nights and hot days in the young cattle is expected at weaning. However, this set of calves acted a little like bloated cattle, yet showed none of the problems from bloat.

Awhile after eating, they became sluggish by the middle of the morning. Took a lackadaisical attitude toward following the feed wagon passing through the trap, dropping one of the deepest-seated habits in Angus cattle. The sound of the stomachs growling took on an audible force the more days on feed.

Words come to mind to describe the calves' condition, like lethargic or stupefaction, to go onto dreamy and drowsy behavior. And then one morning a cube fell from my pants cuff onto the kitchen floor, giving the same odor as the brewery era of San Antonio of my youth. From there, credit solving the mystery to dialing an 800 number for the

feed mill and the candor of the company, which admitted to using the dried distiller grain.

The tall grasses going into the winter last fall made booking feed hobby-like; made us careless. In the bliss of a rich, wet autumn, thoughts passed of strewing a few molasses tubs around the watering after Christmas, or free-choicing a sack or so of mineral fortified with urea in salt troughs, or maybe asking the deer hunters to save potato peelings to gentle the newborn calves.

Frost blotted those myths. In a fortnight, reality hit the banks and the coffee houses and spread to the auction rings around the shortgrass country, that feed ingredients were going to be astronomical. Though the cotton farms stood in abundant crops unheard of in all times, cottonseed meal, the major source of protein, hooked onto a bull market in rocketing prices fierce enough to make a stock trader look for refuge in a penny arcade. The sole tempering force of meal prices came from dealers muttering "12 ... 14 dollahs for corn and milo."

East of San Angelo, the farmers rejoiced at the bonanza. On a Christmas trip to cheer up a sick pal, the sight of too large a cotton crop for the gins to handle made my prognosis rank worse than hers.

In seasons of drouth and insect infestations, shortgrass gin operators carried yo-yos and French harps to pass the long slack periods. Double-six addicts looked on the gin offices as private domino game rooms where they could spend winter afternoons.

Not only were the fields stockpiled in modules of baled cotton, airborne bolls floated along the barrow ditches and white strands snared on the grain of the asphalt for a constant reminder of the injustice of this cruel old world. If any grain for livestock feed was growing or planted, the field was on a back road.

The boom was so intense, the once major watering spot on the way bore a big sign in crude brown paint lettering on the stucco exterior: “Flea market every Thursday.” How cruel can a man be to blare such a message? To blatantly announce to one and all passing down Highway 67 East the implication in so few words, “Our land is so blessed by being a land of cotton, we can shut down a beer joint one day a week to peddle our discards.”

Sheltered in my friends’ riverbank home, the spirit of the trip returned. They had been to see a specialist in Austin; I had been to a Christmas dance. Prospects for self pity translate poorly under such circumstances as comparing

the tragedy of hollow horn feed at 12 cents a pound to daily doses of medicine at 10 bucks a pill.

Going back to the ranch, I took the bypass around San Angelo. Holiday shopping at malls thinned the big-lane speedway. Exiting onto the west ramp, the thought hit that the Noelkes once were wool farmers — Goat Whiskers the Younger still ran sheep — good shearing sheep with low micron counts.

We called ourselves ranchers, but we just grew fiber on a different surface than the cotton farmers. We never thought to figure the number of ewes' backs and bellies to make an acre, or how much of those old sisters' hides it took to grow a bale of wool.

Right at dusk, I passed Grandfather's railroad siding and shipping and shearing pens. How many acres of sheep passed over those grounds before we had to quit? Enough, I suspect, to disqualify us from being jealous of the one good season in a cotton farmer's life.